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**Queer Relations with Technology and Machines**

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# **Queer Relations with Technology and Machines**

**by**

**Samanna J. Maurer**

## **Report**

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Secondly, I would like to thank Jackson Wright, who is not only a superb friend, but also an invaluable asset to this process. Him and I were the only people in our cohort that opted to do reports. We met every Monday on Zoom for a year to work together, but, first and foremost, to check in with each other and talk through our weeks. While Jackson and I had been in a class together before going remote, we grew much closer during this last year. As the pandemic has been incredibly isolating at times, it has been nothing short of a joy logging onto Zoom, FaceTiming with him after class, or meeting in a park to talk with him. It's been inspiring to see his creative vision behind "Masculinity in Transit: Steven Yeun, John Cho, and the Korean American Diaspora Onscreen" come together.

I would also like to thank Madhavi Mallapragada for acting as my Second Reader on this project. “Media and Diaspora” was foundational in thinking about the way that I understand and interact with theory both on the page and in my lived life.

Lastly, I want to extend my thanks and deep gratitude to my family, friends, and my dog, Roswell. Without your support, cheerleading, and tail wagging through my Masters and through the pandemic I would not be sitting here at the end of this process typing out these acknowledgments.

Thank you.

## **Abstract**

### **Queer Relations with Technology and Machines**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2021

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In our exceedingly digital and virtual world, we are increasingly met with images and realities that have been created and influenced by machines. This project attempts to grapple with these creations. This website takes a critical look at the virtual influencer Lil Miquela, the deepfakes used to mask the identity of LGBTQ refugees from Chechnya in *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020), temporalities and bodies in *The Matrix* (1999), and corporeality in *Her* (2013). Through a queer theoretical lens, all of these texts offer differing approaches to imagine technology, its effect on our lives, and the means by which it can be utilized to both support and upend the power structures of capitalism, the State, and heteronormativity. This project is meant to be explored in a nonlinear fashion. Other than coming to this entrance page, there is no clear-cut beginning or end. This website, the culmination of my time at the University of Texas at Austin in pursuit of my Masters in Media Studies, is meant to be interactive and accessible. It is my hope that it is constructed in such a way that it's traversable and understandable, regardless if the user has a Masters degree or not. In creating an amorphous network of hyperlinks, videos,

images that connect both intra- and intertextually, I wanted to replicate an alternate (and networked) temporal space in an effort to place the user at the nexus of machinic connectivity.

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**A quick note before beginning.**

This project's intended form was as a website hosted on the Wix platform. By removing my original content from the site and displacing it into this standardized Thesis/Report form, the full year I spent creating an interactive website, rich with hyperlinks, embedded videos and Instagram posts, as well as opportunities for user interactivity, is not represented. Due to this, this paper-based version of my project will not flow as intended. Please visit <https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman> for my actual project.

In this format each page will include the title and its individual URL to see the page in its intended format.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/about>

This website represents the culmination of my time at the University of Texas at Austin in pursuit of my Master of Arts in Media Studies.

I first began to take an interest in machine-human interactions and relationships in Dr. Sharon Strover's "Communication, Technology, and Culture" class, where I was introduced to the digital influencer Lil Miquela. Miquela was the start of my thinking about the ways that we integrate machines and technology into our daily lives. In following this line of inquiry, I found myself contemplating how taking a recuperative stance toward technology, and looking at our images of machines and technology through a queer lens, can reveal new modes of being in the world. I found myself transfixed by the means that these creations allow humans to imagine a different world and a different self. More often than not, these imaginings take on a distinctly counter-hegemonic sensibility.

Halfway through "Communication, Technology, and Culture" (Spring 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic forced us into remote online courses. I'm writing this section on the one-year anniversary of the World Health Organization declaring a worldwide pandemic. During this unprecedented period, I've completed the majority of my Masters remotely.

In quarantine, this has been an incredibly isolating year. This sense of isolation was frequently remedied (and exacerbated by) technology. During this pandemic, the surveillance state, especially during the BLM protests last summer and the uprising at the

Capitol Building, has grown exponentially. In February, Texas was hit with a snowstorm that effectively shut the state down for over a week, and brought to light how the economy is consistently prioritized over human life. Due to the nature of the pandemic, myself, and millions of others, have been reliant on technology for information and images in these moments. Because of this same technology, I have also been privy to moments that showcase the indomitable nature of the human spirit. So much of the activism that has arisen in the last year is at the hands of (digital) queer and POC activists. Through technology, large swathes of populations are mobilized by these activists to try and combat oppressive normative and neoliberal forces. Banking applications like Venmo, Cashapp, and Paypal have been utilized to provide mutual aid for underrepresented communities. The police are being counter-surveilled by users and their smartphones.

On a personal note, this year has been one of intense (and sometimes painful) growth. My own constantly evolving sense of queerness, both in myself and my surroundings, has blossomed. In looking around, I see moments of queerness spring up from within the banality of the everyday. These moments are almost always linked to outpourings of joy and love.

At some points it felt like I was watching the world crumble through my computer screen. At other times, it felt ridiculous to be working on this website. As I'm coming to the close of this project, I'm realizing what continually brought me back to it, what kept it "worth it" to me, was the nature it's subject and construction. An amorphous entity that was always expanding and not confined to a page. I found comfort in the constant questioning that this project forced me to perform. I had to train myself to look for the

ways that people, narratives, and technology were pushing back against dominant power structures. This project forced me to look at the approaches that creators and activists are taking to envision a different world, a world that is by no means perfect, but one that is tearing down the societal rigidity of a nuclear family, of “straight time,” of the borders between machine and humans, of the boundaries that separate “the real” and the simulated. So many of the examples I use are tied together by love—loving a human, an operating system, a stranger, a constructed family. The manners in which this emotion, and others, can transcend boundaries of the real and simulated, of memory banks and synapses, and how these tie together to make a better world.

This project has been especially fruitful for me as I attempt to grapple with the notion that I will soon be joining “Corporate America.” In addition to working on this project, I’ve also spent the last two years interning at a tech startup here in Austin, Texas. Throughout this internship I have learned about Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Marketing (SEM or paid advertisements). At times this has felt more than a little soulless, seemingly rigging the system to extract capital from users. However, if this project or my time at UT has taught me anything, it is that it’s not as straightforward as simple extraction. As with everything, there is choice involved, and more often than not users behave in a fashion that befuddles the technology leading to skewed data and inconsistent narratives. In relation to myself and the tech field, I view myself, in the words of Jacob Gaboury, “as [an] excessive illegibility [collapsed] into an unwieldy frame, an aberrant third-ness within an otherwise normative system of relations” (153). While it can be frustrating working in the tech field, being witness and subject to

moments of toxic masculinity and comments that assume my desire to marry a man, settle down, and have children, I am continually fascinated by the way the technology manifests and responds to the minutiae of choices that it registers. In once more referencing Gaboury's "Becoming NULL: Queer Relations in the Excluded Middle," there is an urgent need

“for queer theory to engage with the particular forms our technology takes, and not simply the effects those technologies have on queer forms of life or the use of those technologies by queer-identified subjects” (154).

And I am considerably excited to do so.



## **REPRESENTING BEYOND THE HUMAN**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/virtual-media>

In our exceedingly digital and virtual world, we are increasingly met with images and reflections of ourselves that have been created by machines and technology. This section attempts to grapple with such a creation; the virtual influencer Lil Miquela. Lil Miquela acts as a text by which users can think about technology, its effect on reality, and how it can be utilized for capitalistic gain while uncannily resembling the human.

Lil Miquela: Miquela Sousa, better known as Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela) on Instagram, is in a word, cool. She's an influencer, musician, and model living in LA. She's queer and supports the Black Lives Matter movement. Her feed is replete with sunny photos on the beach, or stopping by Fairfax market for some thrifted clothing. She hangs out with up-and-coming musicians and artists. She jet sets to New York City for Fashion Week and São Paulo for Carnaval. She's verified by Instagram and has over 2.2 million followers. Miquela is like the dozens of other influencers that have made their mark on the social networking site, except for one difference:

She's a completely virtual construction.

Created by LA-based media company Brud, Miquela's first post on Instagram was in April of 2016. Since then she has posted over 900 posts documenting her life. She has received endorsements from Calvin Klein, Samsung, and Prada. Joining the ranks of models, Adriana Lima and Rosie Huntington-Whitley, in May of 2020 Miquela signed a contract with modeling agency CAA who will be representing her in TV, film, and branding. The prospect of a TV show or a movie featuring her was also raised.

Miquela is included in this project because she confuses the boundaries between representations of human and machine. Separating her from Brud and taking seriously her narrative of a sentient robot living in this world, she presents an engaging case study as to what a banal future between machines and humans could look like. This mundanity is further emphasized in the way that she is so thoroughly integrated into a market economy. Miquela exists to be seen and referenced, both visually and hypertextually within the social media network of Instagram.

## REPRESENTATIONS OF THE REAL, VIRTUAL INFLUENCER LIL MIQUELA

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/lil-miquela>

This offshoot explores how Miquela Sousa (@[lilmiquela](#)), a virtual CGI influencer, operates within the platforms she resides. I take special care to focus on the affordances granted to her in being able to live online and not have to walk through the world as a flesh and blood person. On her social media, she refers to herself as a robot, yet she is—both physically and narratively—solely the construction of LA-based company Brud. The fact that she is a symbol (or better yet, a simulacra) of humanity, yet is so uncannily real with a narrative past to accompany her image, creates a tension between her identity and the markers of her humanity. The tension between her status as a machine (her being a robot) and as a quasi-human is amplified by the consumerist practices for which she was seemingly created.

In addition to my positioning of Miquela as a purely digital simulacrum between the machine and the human, I provide a comprehensive background on Lil Miquela and Brud, the company that created her. In keeping with my theme of a networked site, I hyperlink to pages both inter- and intra-textually within this specific offshoot, other parts of my project, and to sites completely outside of this one. These links include salient articles, Instagram posts, videos, etc.

Through this section of my report, I not only focus on the construction of Lil Miquela for consumerist purposes, but on the fact that her creation is symbolic of the possibility of robots and humans living together. While her life is seemingly anything

but, Miquela is representative of a banal relationship between humans and robots. While her desires are mostly those of humans, she doesn't hide the fact that she *isn't* human and none of her friends begrudge her that fact. She's not intent on taking over the world or eradicating humanity. Instead, it seems like her main desires include making music, going to restaurants, supporting a handful of social justice issues (defunding the police and BLM), and hanging out with friends.

Like the rest of my project, this section is meant to be interactive and accessible. In an effort to replicate an alternate (and ideally queer) temporal space—a networked one of hyperlinks, videos, and images—there is no correct place to start and no definitive end. It is meant to be explored and navigated in the way that the user sees fit. I have also tried to explain these concepts in a logical and simple way so that one doesn't need an advanced education to understand them.

In thinking about Lil Miquela through a posthumanist and queer framework, my goal is to illustrate the ways that she motions towards key elements of these theories, but is constantly held back by the fact that she was created for integration into a neoliberal market. Where Lil Miquela does excel, is in how she pushes users to think about their own capacity to connect and reside on different technological platforms. She gestures towards a world in which technological creations are eerily human, both in their appearance and behavior.

It is my hope that—as someone who interacts with technology daily—users are pushed to think about the how that Lil Miquela has been constructed for a networked

world, and what it means that, not only does she fit in so seamlessly, but that this networked world can be traversed just as seamlessly with her.

## Theoretical Concerns

### Lil Miquela and the “Desert of the Real”

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/lm-and-the-desert-of-the-real>

Jean Baudrillard wrote *Simulacra and Simulation* in 1983, calling into question society’s experience of “the real.” He begins by positioning “the Borges tale where the cartographers of the Empire draw up a map so detailed that it ends up exactly covering the territory...” as an example of a simulation (Baudrillard 2). However, Baudrillard states that simulations like these, that are *exact* replicas of something real, no longer exist. Simulation now “is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (2). To put it simply, he is stating that the simulations we create now are no longer based off of anything concrete or grounded in the “real.” This is what he calls a *simulacrum*. The simulacrum is a real that has been created without reference or origin. The narrative has shifted from the simulation representing the authentic to attempting to make the authentic conform to the simulation. Baudrillard states that legitimacy is now “a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself” (ibid). Lastly, *Baudrillard argues that this “truth” is “produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models-and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times” (Ibid).*

Lil Miquela is a prime example of a simulacrum in that she is not based on anyone or anything real. I can’t track down and speak to a flesh and blood Miquela Sousa. The real Miquela Sousa is the image I see near daily on my Instagram account. However, the fact that Miquela (re: Brud) has been able to so cohesively and seamlessly

construct and integrate Miquela into people's digital lives is worth investigating. When pictured with human beings like musician Pablo Vittar, the lines between real and hyperreal are blurred. While Miquela is "a condensed image of both imagination and material reality," she doesn't achieve the full potential of Haraway's cyborg, "a creature of a post-gender world (Haraway 150). Miquela is still ultimately at the mercy of her creators. They'll never risk Miquela being dropped by the numerous advertising contracts that she holds, the newest of which is with Mini Cooper.

While Miquela's narrative leaves much to be desired in respects to queerness, Miquela still interferes with normative conceptions of the "real." In this section, I expand more upon Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* and how it pertains to Lil Miquela. In doing so, I aim to prompt users to think about similarly constructed entities that create a bridge between the real and the simulacra, and how those entities prompt us to think about intersections of capitalism and binaries like man/woman or real/simulated.

Baudrillard's verbiage in *Simulacra and Simulation* immediately lends itself to thinking about simulacra, machines, and capital. The authenticity of Miquela benefits from the fact that the ways we visualize success are already inscribed into our society (14). We understand that designer clothing, the ability to travel, and a wielding of technology, are visual cues that connote (financial) success. Miquela doesn't have to be successful, she just has to look it, represent it, and in doing so, embody it. She resides on the various social media platforms, but she also depends on users to click through her images and interact with her on these platforms. She engenders engagement, the first step in generating digital capital. At her core, Miquela is an entity of capital. She exists

because Brud not only continues to receive money from venture capital firms, but is also able to generate income from users' interactions with Miquela's profile and her sponsorships, positioning her as an influencer.

Throughout *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard draws parallels between capitalism and abstracted realities. The ability of capital "to play at deterrence, abstraction, disconnection, [and] deterritorialization" has only been strengthened in the digital age (15). Making money through a digital medium boils down to reach. How many users is an account reaching? How invested are they in the product or influencer? Does the account seem Real? Authentic? While it was long before Web 2.0 came into existence, Baudrillard's assertion that in the moment that the simulacra seems to be losing its power—that power is regained by playing "at the real,...at crisis, [playing] at remanufacturing artificial, social, economic, and political mistakes" (Ibid.) The hacking of Lil Miquela's account and the realization of her robotic self is a near perfect sample of Brud "remanufacturing" mishaps in order to invest in Miquela's narrative and maintain power. At the moment that users were starting to doubt Miquela's credibility, Brud stripped her down and refashioned her into her "authentic self", a robot created to look human.

### **Toying with a Posthuman Definition**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/lm-evading-a-posthuman-definition>

In looking at Lil Miquela through a queer lens, I first attempt to grapple with the fact that Brud has made her appear to behave autonomously. Due to this, I will not be



analyzing Miquela's performance as a queer person, even though she identifies as such. While there is more to queerness than just romantic interest, Miquela has never had a partner that wasn't a self-identified man. Neither her character, nor her construction as an entity, displays the staunchly anti-capitalist, anti-normativity, anti-racist, abolitionist mentality that undergirds so much of a queer sensibility. There have been a few posts referencing "cute girls" and other causes but nothing that has manifested into a concrete course of action, other than her relationship with the model, Nick.

I investigate how Miquela's queerness manifests outside of her narrative construction. Her existence and users' interactions with her, are constantly in flux and mediated by the platforms where she resides. I look towards the ways that Miquela occupies a space between creativity/art and consumer and data capitalism. In teasing out how she operates both within and outside of these structures, I assert that she is a queer entity, but in a form that deals less with her narrative performance of queerness, and instead looks towards how she is constructed as something "beyond human."

### **(BEYOND) HUMAN ON A PLATFORM**

The first two years Miquela was on Instagram, she fully believed she was human. However, Brud was aware that the project could lose some of its "luster," if they continued to try and convince the audience that she was a human. Their solution was to manufacture a feud between Miquela and Bermuda. Bermuda hacked Miquela's Instagram and threatened to tell the truth about her unless she and Miquela could meet.

After Miquela got her account back, she posted a screenshot of her notes where she addresses her fans.

In a truly brilliant move by Brud, they've addressed all of the issues attached to Miquela while progressing her narrative, and seemingly absolving themselves of the problematic issues inherent in Miquela, by simply having her address them head on. From this moment on Miquela outwardly lives as a robot, along with Blawko and Bermuda.

In doing so, Miquela rids herself of the “‘natural’ self...[becoming] an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (Hayles 3). Her boundaries *are* in constant flux. Every single post, repost, share, like, comment, etc., reconstructs her boundaries on the various SNS (social network service) platforms where she resides. Miquela Sousa regains a small amount of agency in being networked. Her ability to expand across a users' accounts is out of Brud's control. Miquela is a datapoint on millions of people's Instagram accounts. If someone is an active follower of Miquela, meaning they like, comment, or share her posts, she then represents multiple data points on said person's account. While this engagement can be leveraged to benefit Brud, as “capitalism can exploit any number of data sources” (Couldry and Mejias 7), Brud is unable to force users to like Miquela's posts and they have no control over how these data points affect each individual user's algorithm and habits. Both Miquela Sousa, the narrative, and Miquela as a concept are “*produced* by market relations [they do] not predate them” (Hayles 3).

A helpful approach to conceptualize Brud's (lack) of control over Miquela, is to visualize a dropper of food coloring over a glass of water. The dropper and amount of coloring put into the water can be controlled. However, once the drops leave the dropper the way it disperses in the water cannot be controlled. Miquela behaves in much the same fashion on the platforms. Brud constructs her narrative and uploads the videos or images, but then loses control over the way she disperses across users' accounts.

### **The Uncanny Nature of Lil Miquela**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/lm-uncanny>

While Miquela doesn't "evoke terror" (Hayles 4) in the strictest sense, she does inspire strong reactions drawing references to Masahiro Mori's "Uncanny Valley." The uncanny valley is a graph of the "proposed relation between the human likeness of an entity, and the perceiver's affinity for it" (Mori et al.). It depicts the relationship between how human a non-human object looks and people's comfort with it.

In my own experience, one undergoes the same experience in realizing that Miquela is not real. At first glance, (while I was in class), I thought she was real. Upon closer inspection I realized that she wasn't, and I found myself in that strange liminal space of deeply uncomfortable but unable to look away. However, the pleasure that I derive from Miquela stems from the ability to follow her life on Instagram. I, along with nearly 3 million others, lose myself in her narrative and her ability to speak to us on Instagram in such a familiar way. She doesn't speak like one might think a robot would,

nor does she behave like one. In fact, her posts are replete with current slang and pop culture references.

As Hayles states, “In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation...robot teleology and human goals” (Hayles 3). On the platform, Miquela behaves as a human, as well as pushing the narrative that she is inhabiting our world as well. This narrative is further supported by her consistent geotags in a number of hotspot locations in LA. She has goals as well, just like us. She desires for success, love, happiness. As a “condensed image of both imagination and material reality”, Miquela presents interesting issues with classification (Haraway 150). How is she to be classified? She isn't real, and she isn't a robot in the physical sense. At the very least she's a narrative that accompanies an image. While this may be the case, what of the clothes she wears? They are available for purchase, and she's even done a few collaborations with specific design houses. She also interacts with people we know are definitely "of this world." Yet upon being situated with her image, they become part of her world. How do we come to terms with the “no-mans land” Miquela seemingly inhabits?

### **Unreal but Verified**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/lm-unreal-verified>

Lil Miquela's persona also invites investigation of what it means to be a person on social media. As Haraway states in “A Cyborg Manifesto”, in the 21st century “the boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us” (153). While

Miquela's construction itself blurs these boundaries, I also think about how she is represented on Instagram. Miquela, Bermuda, and Blawko all have a blue checkmark next to their usernames. This means they are all Instagram "verified", assuring us that "Instagram has confirmed that an account is the authentic presence of the public figure, celebrity or global brand it represents."

In which category of "public figure," "celebrity," or "global brand" does Miquela reside? We know that Miquela cannot run her account on her own volition. Unlike Facebook, Instagram does not require users to participate using their real name (Gillespie 62). The blue verified checkmark is supposed to insulate participants against fraudulent users, especially those that gain a large following. It is in this way that the checkmark used to act as a marker of the user's physicality. However, with the introduction of global brands we are beginning to see the integration of corporations and brands as personas in and of themselves (see Wendy's twitter account for a prime example). The blue checkmark complicates notions of realness on online platforms, as well as highlights the construction of self/celebrity as mediated by online platforms.

Theorizing Miquela as a posthuman subject continually proves to be difficult due to the complications that arise from Brud. They are the ones controlling her and making decisions, so any aspect she does embody is negated by the fact that it was purposefully added as a tactic to turn a profit.

## **Speak Up Music Video**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/lm-speak-up-music-video>

Directed by Elliot Sellers, Lil Miquela's "Speak Up" music video contains scenes of apparent DIY aesthetics and video haptics to depict the unravelling of her and Nick's relationship. The video, set in an urban center (Los Angeles) with product placement abounding, attempts using "visual haptics" and harkens to a DIY aesthetic, a queer mode of production, but ultimately falls short.

In attributing visual clarity as synonymous with narrative clarity, the video is unwilling to sacrifice, no matter how momentary, comprehension. "Speak Up" demonstrates a DIY aesthetic that has evolved to a level of "professionalism that is aimed towards...economic sustainability" without truly engaging in DIY (Bennett and Guerra 7). In the following offshoot, I look at how Lil Miquela's music video, "Speak Up," engages with a shallow representation of haptic imagery to motion towards embodiment and engaging the viewer in Miquela and Nick's relationship. I contend with the fact that its producers do not successfully bring the audience into Nick and Miquela's relationship as they are too concerned with product placement. Due to this, the video consistently denies the audience an opportunity to construct themselves within the couple's relationship and create a more embodied viewing experience in the process.

## **MOTIONING TOWARDS VISUAL HAPTICS**

In "Video Haptics and Erotics," Laura Marks theorizes the differences between "haptic perception" and "haptic visuality." Haptic perception is defined as the way we

experience touch in two forms, externally and internally. Externally refers to the literal sensation of the touch, while internally is the feeling the touch creates inside of you. Haptic *visuality* is the feeling of touch constructed by sight. To put it simply, haptic perception is literally feeling touch by touching or being touched. Haptic visuality constructs those senses from a visual input. Haptic images don't only invite identification between the image and the spectator but "encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image" (332). In having to work to construct the image themselves, haptic images mean "participate in the production of the cinematic experience," as they have to "work to constitute the image" (339). The spectator cannot just watch the image as a third party. Instead, they work to construct the image and in doing so, place their body at the center as well. As haptic images are frequently blurry or in motion, there is a lack of mastery over the image, forcing more attentive engagement from the viewer.

### **MASTERY AND VISUAL CONSUMPTION**

In "Speak Up," the audience is never invited to construct the image. They watch Nick and Miquela's relationship tribulations from a distance. "Speak Up" lacks visual haptics because the audience is *encouraged* to consume the images of Nick and Miquela. Examples of this encouragement are most evident when the audience sees from Nick's point of view. For example, in the first bed scene Miquela is shot in a medium shot, center frame, and slowly strips off her sweater to display her bare back to Nick (and us). Later, she lies down in the bed and looks directly up at Nick (and into the camera).

Miquela is in focus and lying still for our consumption. We can see all of her immediately.

We are denied viewing Nick from Miquela's point of view. However, his body, abdominal muscles and tattoos are frequently on display for our consumption as well. In the moments that his body is available to us, Miquela is also in the scene, converting the audience into romantic voyeurs, allowing us to clearly see their relationship crumble.

The "Speak Up" video invites the spectator to view Miquela's and Nick's relationship as it crumbles, yet it maintains enough distance to keep the spectator from bridging the gap and constructing themselves *within* the relationship. In continuing to investigate Miquela and her embodiment of the possibility of a mundane coexistence between humans and machines, "Speak Up" functions as a *representation* of a world between two teenage entities. While this is valuable in and of itself, "Speak Up" does not go the extra length to involve the viewer in this coupling—instead, sacrificing the momentum it had built to ensure that the product placement takes center stage. It becomes obvious that Miquela is technologically constructed to be seen. The "Speak Up" music video acts as a spectacle of Brud's ingenuity and Miquela's character.

### **Lil Miquela's Squad**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/lm-squad>

Further strengthening the connection between digital and real, Brud added two more digital characters to their repertoire in 2016 and 2018. The appearance of these two new characters came with their own backgrounds and personalities. Bermuda, a politically conservative blonde woman, and Blawko, a brand-oriented POC man who



always has his mouth covered, came onto Miquela's scene with their own intercrossing narratives.

While the manufactured narratives of these digital creations can seem trite, it's relevant to understand that Bermuda and Blawko serve to strengthen Miquela's public image and narrative, as well as give her simulated life more depth. This translates into higher engagement from users on Instagram, and further substantiates Brud within the population of brands using the social networking site. As Instagram has the highest engagement rate of any social networking site, delivering "58 times more engagement per follower than Facebook, and 120 times more engagement per follower than Twitter," crafting personalities that hook users (and keep them coming back) is imperative to Brud's ability to monetize Lil Miquela and her story.

If Brud is able to keep a host of characters within their repertoire they can drive engagement back to Miquela through a number of accounts. This urge to drive engagement is evident through the amount of photos Miquela is in with Blawko or Bermuda (or Nick while she was dating him. They've since "broken up" and the model has erased every photo on his Insta feed and started over). If Miquela isn't in a photo chances are that her or a different Brud character has commented on it.

It is through this linking that Miquela expands her social influence. As Herbert Kelman theorized in his article, "Processes of Opinion Change," social influence progresses through processes of compliance, identification, and internalization (62). He views these three processes as different means to link the individual and the social system (Kelman, "Further Thoughts", 126). While he originally conceived of this in terms of

whenever a “person changes his behavior as a result of induction by another person or group,” the theory is still relevant in reference to social media accounts and influencers (128).

## **BERMUDA**

Bermuda, a white blonde woman who used to support Trump and Tomi Lahren was created by Cain Intelligence (a fictional company also created by Brud). She first arrived to Instagram in December 2016. Within a year (around August 2017) she begins to harass Miquela. The antagonism between her and Miquela grows as Bermuda’s captions grow more threatening. In April of 2018, Bermuda breaks the news to Miquela that she is not human. Since this revelation, Bermuda and Miquela have made amends and now act as each others’ confidants. In a brilliant marketing ploy, Bermuda, created by Brud, acted, not only as a direct foil for Lil Miquela, but the vessel by which her true nature could be made public.

Brud not only utilizes its characters to lend depth and drama to Miquela’s narrative, but to progress it.

## **BLAWKO**

With his first photo appearing January 18, 2018, Blawko is markedly different from Miquela. His rambling Instagram captions, and photos that feature him partying, smoking, or showing off his latest outfit, position Blawko (while still repping designer clothing) to be a lot less oriented towards sponsorships and monetization. Instead, I

propose that, in being Miquela's friend, he acts as a character to bolster her public image and give her simulated life more depth. He also creates public engagement on the platform through the networking/connecting of his account with Miquela's.

## **NICK**

Nick was Miquela's boyfriend for a number of months. While this isn't the first time we've seen her with a romantic interest, this was the first time it was explicitly stated that they were dating. They date for a few months, Nick appearing on Miquela's feed in nine posts during that time. Upon coming back from Paris Fashion Week, Miquela announces their "Conscious Uncoupling." Citing a need for growth and realizations, Miquela ends with the assurance that her and Nick are still incredibly close.

## **WHO IS NICK? IS HE REAL?**

Yes. He is human. Nick (last name unknown) is a model signed with New York Model Management and Demant St. Claire. While it might not have "worked out" with Nick and Miquela, the inclusion of a human into Miquela's intimate circle connects back to my proposal of imagining a world where robots and humans mundanely (co)exist. As Donna Haraway states in "A Cyborg Manifesto," not only is social reality lived social relations but that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (149). Miquela and Nick's relationship—while fictitious—inspires us to think about a reality where the line between human and machine is collapsed or, better yet, permeable to the extent where it is nonexistent.

## **NICK AND “SPEAK UP”**

Within two days of the breakup post, Miquela teases a new song. Two days after that, she announces this new song, “Speak Up.” Nick’s blurred out face is on the cover. The song drops on March 11, 2020 with the subsequent video dropping March 24. Nick is heavily featured in both the music video, and the posts leading up to it. Miquela hyped the music video as a video with her “real life ex turned BFF/brother and all his abdominal muscles while we reenact our failed relationship”.

## **Product Placement and Branding**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/lm-partnerships-branding>

For over a year, Lil Miquela has had a contract with Samsung, specifically for their Galaxy S10 model of phone (although she has one post with the S20 model and one with the Galaxy Z Flip) . Her relationship with Samsung has manifested in multiple forms. She is part of two video spots for the company. One of them is a 20 second video solely focused on her. It begins with her walking into frame and her voice saying, “Everything seemed unimaginable when I was just a few lines of code.” This line simultaneously furthers her identity away from human while still keeping her in the realm of “sentient being,” instead of a CGI creation. The next video produced by Samsung features the other members of #TeamGalaxy ; musician Steve Aoki, gamer Tyler Blevins (Ninja), and actress Millie Bobby Brown. It’s worth noting that the footage in this video is the exact same as that of the previous, yet Miquela is the only character that doesn’t speak. Shown in the recording studio with Blevins, she looks at the camera as it quick-

cuts away from her and towards her again (this time in different clothing) in front of a wall. She stands defiantly in front of the wall, her own moving images populating behind her. These images, her life lived in photographs and on a platform, wordlessly hint at her own digitality.

A number of photos that Lil Miquela has posted advertise for both Samsung and another company. For example, her partnership with #kitstokickcancer in support of Women's Cancer Research Fund (@wcrfcure) is a 3-tiered post, each brand reaping the benefits of association.

#### **SAMSUNG ALONGSIDE OTHER ENDORSEMENTS**

Miquela's ability to be featured both independently and with others as a virtual construction speaks to the power that she wields within the advertising world. She is able to monetize her image. In keeping with the sense of an integration of machine and human, Miquela continues to present a future where the robots are seamlessly integrated into market capitalism. In fact, they seem to desire it for themselves as well.

#### **Speaking Your Truth with Calvin Klein**

**<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/lm-calvin-klein>**

On May 16, 2019 Miquela posted a photo of her with model Bella Hadid and the caption "No one else can define our own truths. #MYTRUTH #MYCALVINS followed by a separate post of a short video of her and Hadid in a Calvin Klein advertisement. In the advertisement Hadid's voiceover states, "Life is about opening doors," As the camera

continues to pan in a circular motion, Miquela walks into the frame. She approaches Hadid. As strings are introduced to the chill electronic beat, Hadid says, "creating new dreams you never knew could exist." Her and Miquela then embrace and share a kiss. The camera pans out to show them in head-to-toe Calvin Klein as the lights fade. The screen fades to black and the words "Calvin Klein" appear on screen.

## RECEPTION

While a feat of digital manipulation, the ad was met with rabid accusations of "queerbating" from the LGBTQ community. Queerbating is "an exploitative tactic used to tease a queer romance to draw viewers in without any intention of fully developing or representing LGBTQ people and relationships."

Many of the issues that viewers drew from the ad stemmed from the fact that Bella Hadid has been in a number of high-profile heterosexual relationships (The Weeknd, Odell Beckham Jr.), yet she was chosen to kiss another woman...who isn't even real. Calvin Klein depicted a same-sex kiss but managed, through the workaround of Lil Miquela, to actually not engage with any of these surrounding issues, or even the kiss itself at all. This is a shame, like the online publication Indie states, because the "brand's public efforts towards casting sexually, gender, and bodily diverse individuals have performed quite nicely."

To me, the CK ad reads the same as Lil Miquela's "Speak Up" music video. Lil Miquela is constructed and filmed in such a way that positions her for consumption not

representation. The pan out to a wide, full body shot at the end is what cinches it for me. They stand there, embracing, with Calvin Klein's logo illuminated for all to see.

In doing so, the ad also teases out the tensions between commodification and branding. In her book *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, Sarah Banet-Weiser defines the differences between commodification and branding.

### **LIL MIQUELA AND BRAND CULTURE**

Banet-Weiser continues to assert that “commodities are a crucial part of these stories about ourselves—the process of branding is broader [and] situated within culture” (5). In making “something that was not previously thought of as a product, “Lil Miquela is once again constructed to be *seen* and marveled at (4). Most importantly, she is constructed to be consumed. How does Lil Miquela affect the narratives we tell ourselves about ourselves? I argue that Miquela herself, by having no agency of her own—only that of her creators, is a commodity herself. While Henry Jenkins and others (12) argue that consumers still maintain agency in the complex network of cultural dynamics and media convergence (12). In creating Lil Miquela, and effectively avoiding the spotlight, Brud complicates the relationship between commodification and branding. Miquela exists in a bizarre limbo of interacting with brands, but unable to make the decision of which brands for herself. Her very construction by Brud toes the line between a commodity and a branded self. If branding is ultimately the “transformation of everyday, lived culture to brand culture (5) how does an entity like Lil Miquela, who doesn't live, who only resides on the internet engage in branding?

## AN AUTHENTIC COMMODITY

Like with other influencers, Miquela highlights the lack of a clear “demarcation between marketer and consumer, between seller and buyer” (7). In addition, she, as a creation, is indicative of the changing and increasingly complex advertising strategies, “especially in a digital media environment where viral ads, guerrilla marketing, online consumer campaigns and competitions, and user feedback mechanisms are ways for corporations to script advertising messages that feel distinctly noncommercial, and therefore *authentic*” (11, my italics). Banet-Weiser argues that this notion of “authenticity” also has its place within a branded culture, something that Miquela frequently capitalizes upon. In an advanced capital society, “authenticity is not only understood and experienced as the pure, inner self of the individual, it is also a relationship between individuals and commodity culture that is constructed as ‘authentic’” (14). In 21st century marketing, the notion of “authenticity” becomes even more intertwined with the “increasingly elaborate relationships between producers and consumers, [namely] through the principle of ‘engagement’” (38). Where does Lil Miquela reside on this spectrum? Is she a producer or a consumer? Does the fact that she's a construction of commodity culture herself make any difference?

Seeing the interpolation of authenticity and capitalism, it becomes increasingly difficult for me to see CK’s use of Hadid and Miquela as anything less than an attempt to portray their brand as technologically modern (i.e. “cool”) and inclusive, without having



to engage in the labor of actually doing so (thus risking the possible blowback/alienation of a largely heteronormative audience).

## **Synthetic Fashion**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/lm-synthetic-media>

While Brud remains tight-lipped on exactly how they construct Lil Miquela, digital fashion is on the rise with a number of companies jumping into the game. Most notable are the Scandinavian retailer, Carlings and Amsterdam-based design house, The Fabricant.

### **CARLINGS, AFFORDABLE FASHION**

Carlings released their first collection of digital clothing in November 2018, with pieces ranging from €10 to €30. With 19 different options, customers bought the piece and supplied Carlings with a photo of themselves. Carlings would then edit and size the article of clothing onto the photo. They manipulated it so that it looked like customers were wearing the clothing. After hiring influencers to promote it, the collection sold out in a week. While it was a limited run, Carlings still offers the “Last Statement T-shirt,” a real t-shirt that allows the wearer to digitally change its design with custom filters.

### **THE FABRICANT, DIGITAL COUTURE**

The Fabricant is not for the average consumer. It boasts a number of higher profile collaborations from Tommy Hilfiger to Japanese streetwear brand AAPE+. The Fabricant’s website is bold, focusing on what they call the “Phygital Experience.”

Phygital being the “merging of physical and digital capabilities to create interactive brand experience” (“The Fabricant”). Aside from building “end-to-end 3D narratives” they also heavily focus on digital couture, stating that “this digital-only fashion can be used and traded in virtual realities.”

While digital fashion might seem like a hoax, people are spending real money on it. Carlings’ first collection sold out in a week. The Fabricant’s “Iridescence” dress sold for over \$9000. Amber Jae Slooten, the Creative Director at Fabricant said the following about the rise of the digital fashion industry:

While verbose, Slooten brings up very real interests concerning the merging of humans and machines. In Slooten’s eyes digital fashion seems to be the first step to the eradication of “essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism...” (Hayles 3). These articles of clothing, like Lil Miquela, are “produced by market relations and [do] not in fact predate them” (3). In continuing, N. Katherine Hayles explains this posthuman subject is “a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction.” Miquela is already replicating this sense of constant construction and reconstruction with every Instagram photo/video she takes. The only way she can exist is to be built, every time.

## **(UN)MASKING THE QUEER IN DAVID FRANCE’S *WELCOME TO CHECHNYA***

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/wtc>

David Frances’ *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020) focuses on the survivors of Chechnya’s “Gay Purge” and the dedicated network of activists that work tirelessly to smuggle LGBTQ persons out of the country. Since as recent as 2017, there have been reports of the government targeting, abducting, and torturing LGBTQ Chechens. In order to protect the identity of the survivors *Welcome to Chechnya* uses deepfake (colloquially known as face-swap) technology. By swapping the faces of the survivors with faces of queer activist volunteers from New York, France is able to record the harrowing events of the individual survivors’ escapes from Ramzan Kadyrov’s Republic without sacrificing “their humanity.”

This “humanity,” veiled and protected by technology is why *Welcome to Chechnya* is included in my report. Deepfakes allow viewers to confront the human rights violations being committed in Chechnya “face to face.” The deepfakes in the documentary mislead and obfuscate direct visual perception as a tactic to protect a vulnerable group of people. These human faces, constructed by technology, look out towards the audience.

I’ve included David France’s *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020) within this offshoot because I find the manner in which deepfakes are utilized endlessly fascinating.. They also offer an intriguing counter to Lil Miquela, who was created to be seen, investigated, and integrated into the market. The faces created for *Welcome to Chechnya* were created

to be seen as well but with the express intent of hiding the people underneath from the dangers of living in Chechnya.

Throughout this section of my report I analyze deepfakes to investigate how this technology performs an anti/counter-surveillance purpose. The deepfakes allow the survivors to be recorded, while seemingly hiding in plain sight. While deepfakes do not negate extreme amounts of danger the survivors are in, they allow each survivor to regain some agency over their story and their life. In complicating this regaining of agency, each survivor does so by “wearing” someone else’s face. Previously, deepfakes were (at their best) used in humorous videos and (at their worst) to spread disinformation or swap well-known faces into pornography. In *Welcome to Chechnya*, deepfakes provide a counter-reading to the notion that technology has “long been and largely continues to be used to kill, corral, and brutalize already marginalized populations” (Haber 163). *Welcome to Chechnya* provides the opportunity to look at the way that technology, previously used to reinforce top-down power structures, can be exercised to *protect* marginalized populations, while also allowing for the dissemination of their story and for heightened forms of empathetic connection.

The use of deepfake technology in *Welcome to Chechnya* performs three roles;

1. It masks the identities of the survivors, thus protecting them from being tracked and integrated into further structures of power and discipline by Ramzan Kadyrov’s regime while allowing them to maintain their queer identity

2. It blends the boundary between the real and the constructed, allowing for a permeable barrier between the survivors and audience
3. It is a measure of queer activism within the power structures of technology and surveillance.

## **What are Deepfakes?**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/wtc-what-are-deepfakes>

A “deepfake” refers to a video where someone’s face has been swapped with someone else’s using AI machine learning. First appearing in 2018 and the result of hobbyists experimenting with neural networks, there are now a number of apps and open source software that can easily swap someone’s face onto another with little difficulty.

## **HOW DO THEY WORK?**

Deepfakes commonly work in two fashions; either by directly mapping an actor’s facial movements onto a video created for that purpose (known as a target video) or by mapping a face onto other videos that have already been created.

Deepfakes are created using AI machine learning using “deep learning” and neural networks. Neural networks are algorithms that focus on finding patterns within massive amounts of data and visual examples. Neural networks are created with the intent to mimic the way the human brain works. Because of this they are adept at finding patterns and can build off of their discoveries.

Deepfake technology is the same premise as CGI (computer-generated imagery). While previously only available to big-budget filmmakers, the technology has become much more accessible. While creating deepfakes still takes a lot of time and processing power, the technology has never been cheaper or more accessible.

## **THE DANGERS OF DEEPFAKES**

Deepfakes pose a lot of dangers in our current climate, especially considering the sheer amount of information that people have access to at any moment in time. The dangers of deepfakes range from swapping faces on pornographic videos with those of celebrities or politicians to videos of public individuals spewing mis/disinformation. This false information can sway elections or public opinion about causes. Deepfakes are notoriously hard to catch, as the AIs “continuously improve their performance by learning from experience and adjusting their behaviour based on prior performance and new inputs” (Maras and Alexandrou). Intersected with the systems inherent in the majority of social media algorithms, deepfakes have the potential to spread quickly and be seen by millions. As Aaron Smith writes for the PEW Research Center, “nearly all the content people see on social media is chosen not by human editors but rather by computer programs...” (20). These algorithms analyze massive amounts of data, as well as the habits of users, to prioritize content that a user might find engaging. To put it simply a snowball effect is created, the more engagement a post gets, the more it spreads.

As Fallis writes, direct visual perception has always been a “source of information that we can simply trust without a lot of verifying” (1). Basically, people tend to trust

what they see and when one cannot be in the right place at the right time, video becomes the next best thing. Deepfakes exploit our trust in our own visual perception.

## **POTENTIAL POSITIVE USES OF DEEPPAKES**

Deepfakes and *Welcome to Chechnya* were included in this project for the specific fact that studying *Chechnya's* deepfakes is an engaging counter reading to the previous arguments of their societal dangers. *Welcome to Chechnya* is generative in a number of respects. Deepfakes are used to counteract and protect against a hyper-disciplined surveillance state. Aside from showing a non-hierarchical queer network of activists smuggling survivors out of the Republic, *Chechnya* also utilized a similar network in their postproduction. Queer activists, found primarily through Instagram, volunteered to have their faces mapped for the AI. These volunteers offered up their agency and identities to allow the Chechen survivors' their own.

The use of deepfakes in the documentary performed the dual role of protecting survivors' identities while not sacrificing the audience's emotional attachment to the survivors. Bill Nichols, an innovator in documentary studies and professor emeritus at San Francisco State University agreed on the effectiveness of the deepfakes; "I am seeing him—him being his 'face'—bare his soul."

Deepfakes in *Welcome to Chechnya* give users a chance to think, not only about the possible positive utility of deepfake technology, but about how queerness is surveilled and masked in modern society, and how queer activism manifests in the digital world.

## **Discipline and Punish in *Welcome to Chechnya***

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/wtc-discipline-and-punish>

Earlier in 2020, the U.S. State Department officially sanctioned Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation, citing “gross violations of human rights in the Chechen Republic.” According to The State Department there is credible information that Kadyrova has been torturing and killing LGBTQ persons in Chechnya (a semi-autonomous republic of Russia) for more than a decade. The first reports of the human rights violations were reported by the Russian news outlet *Novaya Gazeta* by Elena Milashina, who has since left Russia fearing for her safety.

Within this offshoot, I utilize Achille Mbembé’s concept of “necropolitics” to position LGBTQ Chechens in a space of death determined by the State. Because of this, they seemingly lie in a liminal space between Foucault’s notions of punishment and discipline.

### **BRIEF OVERVIEW OF FOUCAULT’S *DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH***

In Foucault’s 1975 book, *Discipline and Punish*, he describes how the application of power has evolved and changed forms through the centuries. Prior to the 18th century, torture and imprisonment were the standard ways that power was applied to bodies. As evident in Foucault’s example of “Damiens the regicide” (3) being drawn and quartered in a public square, torture was a public spectacle. This spectacle was intrinsically tied with punishment and the application of power on individual bodies. With the advent of the 19th century and its subsequent industrial revolution, power shifted from being



applied to individual bodies in the form of punishment and shifted to disciplining large groups of people in an efficient manner. This took the form of controlling the body at “the level of the mechanism itself—movements, gestures, attitudes...the efficiency of movements, their internal organization...” (135). Here Foucault is asserting that power is maintained over the body as a daily *process* not the end result of a spectacle. The spectacle has been replaced by the “uninterrupted play of calculated gazes” (177). Power is asserted by the disciplining of bodies—making sure that they conform to the normalizing ideals of the governing body. Using the timetable created for “the House of young prisoners in Paris” (6) and examples of children at school (29), Foucault depicts how bodies are disciplined and regulated in all spheres of life. This process of normalization, coupled with surveillance, became one of the “great instruments of power” toward the end of the 19th century (184). Bodies that are seen as aberrant are examined and “corrected” to conform to the norm or their humanity is denied as they are expelled from society.

### **OCCUPYING THE “IN-BETWEEN”**

In Chechnya bodies are hyper-surveilled not only by the state, but by friends and family for any sign of deviance. This constant fear of being discovered, and the violent consequences, produces “practised [and] ‘docile’ bodies” (Foucault 138). In simple terms, this means that the constant pressure and feeling of being watched, coupled with the immense fear of discovery and torture, means that the queer bodies in Chechen society lose their sense of power and agency. In order to survive and not be found out

they regulate themselves to fit the heteronormative gender norms, as laid out by Kadyrov. The Republic disciplines its citizens as Foucault theorizes, but queer Chechens are not “treated” with the intent to normalize or correct through combinations of psychology, medicine, and surgery. Rather, through surveillance by both the government and its citizens, the Chechen government tracks and separates queer Chechens from their families and friends. The targeted Chechens are then forced into camps and *punished* through captivity and torture. In this way, the Republic’s treatment of queer Chechens aligns with Achille Mbembé’s concept of necropolitics.

In “Necropolitics,” Achille Mbembé builds upon Foucault’s notion of “biopower,” theorizing the way that groups of people occupy a *death-world*. Mbembé defines *death-worlds* as “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life...[and] the status of *living dead*. (40). *Death-worlds* are created by sovereign powers and their ability to “dictate who may live and who must die” (11). *Death-worlds* or death-in-life is characterized by being kept alive, but in a constant state of injury and terror. Living in Chechnya, under a power that vehemently denies the existence of gay Chechens, queer Chechens occupy a *death-world*. Surveilled both by the state and by friends and family, they are posited contra to Chechnya’s (normative and hyper-masculine) national identity. Mbembé theorizes “that national identity is imagined as an identity against the Other” (27) and that “killing becomes precisely targeted” (29). Due to this segregation and violence, whole groups of people disperse over large areas of land and are no longer “contained by the boundaries of a territorial state” (34). *Welcome to Chechnya* highlights this dispersal as the activists

desperately try and smuggle as many queer Chechens out of Chechnya as possible. The ones that manage to escape live away from their family and home as refugees. Many of them spend months in hiding hoping that they are granted asylum to legally live in a different country.

### **Queer (Dis)Information**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/wtc-queer-disinformation>

For this section I will be pulling heavily from Jacob Gaboury's "Becoming NULL" and his theorization of queer relations and technology. Throughout "Becoming NULL: Queer relations in the excluded middle," Gaboury utilizes the concept of a NULL set in data relations between computers as a way to talk about queerness within "a normative system of relations" (153). Programming a NULL set "indicates the absence of any value whatsoever, such that linguistically it is not considered a value at all, but rather a "marker" that indicates a state of indeterminacy" (153). Null markers are illegible and the system will work hard to create data sets that exclude them. In their illegibility, Null markers create a "space for indeterminacy" (153) deep within the system they reside in.

People whose existence is something other than white, straight, and male are forced to occupy varying shades of risk simply by living in a world that privileges white, straight, and male. Gaboury comments on the ways that these individuals have developed tactics to negotiate both being seen and remaining unseen by power. Deepfakes allow for a strategic means to be both seen *and* hidden within the structures of the Chechen

Republic and its surveillance. This is not accomplished from hiding but from making physical identity illegible.

I relate deepfakes to Gaboury's NULL concept. Deepfakes allow the queer bodies in *Welcome to Chechnya* a "strategic illegibility (153). Illegible by the disciplining and normalizing powers of the state, the deepfakes deny the Chechen government access to the survivors' bodies. They are able to maintain their agency within a system that wants them eradicated.

The National Endowment for Democracy (The NED) defines disinformation as "politically motivated messaging designed explicitly to engender public cynicism, uncertainty, apath, distrust, and paranoia..." In taking this definition of "disinformation" I argue that the deepfake use in *Welcome to Chechnya* is an example of both "queer disinformation" and *queered* disinformation. Queer disinformation relates to the queer identities and bodies that are being protected by deepfake technology. Activists, such as Miguel Grisanti (pictured on the left), volunteered to have their facial features mapped in order to act as "human shields" for the survivors. The overlay of these volunteers' faces are direct actions that keep queer bodies visible but hidden from the Chechen government. The volunteers' faces serve to take the singular light of Jeremy Bentham's *panopticon* and diffuse it across multiple bodies at once—the survivor and the activist. Disinformation creates uncertainty and unrest through the spread of false information that targets an individual or group of people, usually members of minority groups. For example, the Rohingya Muslim community in Myanmar has been the target of a massive government-backed disinformation campaign, spread through edited photos and videos

depicting the Rohingya (falsely) committing atrocities. This campaign has managed to sway public opinion to such an extent that whole Rohingya villages have been razed by the government.

In moving from protection of bodies and into technology, *queered* disinformation (as mediated by the deepfakes) asks us to “imagine how queer theory and queer life might begin to rearticulate itself in ways that engage with and within technical systems” (Gaboury, 145). In conceptualizing *queer* disinformation, I hope to offer a viewpoint from inside the structure of disinformation itself. While I do believe that deepfakes signal the possibility of a terrifying future based on the inability to visually tell truth from construction, *Welcome to Chechnya* offers a counterexample where this blurring of visual truth and visual construction allows the survivors’ narrative truth to come out.

Queer disinformation also allows for the spread of expression. As Benjamin Haber articulates in “The Queer Ontology of Digital Method,” new technologies “rearticulate embodiment and environment, queerness can more forcefully articulate a vision of indeterminacy that...is bent toward thoughtful interconnection and the perverse proliferation of pleasures and expressions” (161). The effect of being able to clearly see the emotions of the survivors endears us to them. They are present in an embodied way, much more present than had they been protected by a blur or animated (a tactic that was focus tested before the post-production of the documentary). The deepfakes serve to create layers of connection for the survivors. While they connect through the underground network of activists, the deepfakes allow them to connect with us.

Aside from distributing agency back to the survivors, deepfakes in *Welcome to Chechnya* are an example of queered disinformation. *Chechnya* uses a bottom-up formation to counter government control. The same tactics used in disinformation and spreading fear have been co-opted to protect at-risk bodies.

### **MORE INFORMATION: MYANMAR AND DISINFORMATION**

Disinformation creates uncertainty and unrest through the spread of false information that targets an individual or group of people, usually members of minority groups. For example, the Rohingya Muslim community in Myanmar has been the target of a massive government-backed disinformation campaign, spread through edited photos and videos depicting the Rohingya (falsely) committing atrocities. This campaign has managed to sway public opinion to such an extent that whole Rohingya villages have been razed by the government.

### **Queer Activism**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/wtc-queer-activism>

*Welcome to Chechnya* exemplifies two examples of queer activism, both operating in different ways. The queer activism in the film is:

1. Centered on the protection of queer bodies by queer people
2. Non-hierarchical, non-central, and dispersed across time and space.

When David France decided to use deepfakes in *Welcome to Chechnya*, he contacted a number of activists, namely through Instagram, to lend their faces to protect the

Chechen refugees. In the documentary, the explicit intention of deepfakes is to protect the identity of queer bodies as they are smuggled out of an oppressive regime.

The volunteers who acted as the survivor's "human shields" were mainly from New York. Ryan Laney, France's visual effects supervisor, worked on creating the deepfakes for each survivor. For over a year, he worked at a secret location and offline.

The activist network presented in *Welcome to Chechnya* and the documentary's production are both queer in their formation as well. David Isteev, one of the activists responsible for smuggling people out of Chechnya, helps run the network of activists primarily from his cell phone. His number is passed by word-of-mouth amongst gays and lesbians in Chechnya. They then text or call him asking for help to be smuggled out of the country. The use of WhatsApp as a tool of resistance further supports my recuperative stance towards technology. This type of fluid construction, mediated by two networks (a network of people and WhatsApp's messaging platform) rejects bounded linear relationships, instead focusing on flexible and fluid pockets of community within Chechnya. In a roundtable discussion on queer temporalities, Christopher Nealon poses the question:

How are our theorizations of alternate temporalities legible not only as attempts to think through the possibilities of movement and community but also as attempts to think through or around or against the dominant form of the social organization of time, that is, the time of the commodity? (Dinshaw et al. 188)

*Welcome to Chechnya* portrays a group of people that not only care deeply for each other but risk their lives daily to enact this care. The relationship between the Chechen activists

and survivors operates outside of the normative construction family. They are in constant hiding, moving secretly between safehouses and into neighboring countries. With no clear nucleus, head of the family, or lineage, the relationships between survivors in *Welcome to Chechnya* are amorphous and spread out amongst a number of countries. Survivors have found asylum in other countries, in hiding in other countries, under the supervision and care of David or Olga in safehouses in Chechnya, or in hiding with only a voice on the other of the WhatsApp call. These relationships are further layered and dispersed across boundary lines with the addition of the activists France enlisted. *Welcome to Chechnya* serves to create a global web built on a deep sense of compassion, protectiveness, and anonymity to defend and rescue queer Chechens.

### **Unveiling the Queer**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/wtc-unveiling-the-queer>

Through deepfakes, *Welcome to Chechnya* complicates what it means to “conceal queerness.” One of the survivors, “Grisha,” decides to reveal his identity so he can go on record against the Chechen government. “Grisha” holds a press conference and reveals himself to be Maxim Lapunov, a refugee who had spent 12 days in a Chechen prison. As the mic is given to Lapunov, in a visually arresting moment, the deepfake that was previously protecting his identity, fades from his face and the audience is greeted with the unaltered face of a man who survived the Gay Purge. This scene is stunning in its artistry. First revealed is Lapunov’s striking blue eyes. He glances around at the press conference



attendees, his face suddenly rounder, and mouth set in a line. As he raises the mic to speak, the scene cuts to black and we are introduced to his true name and age.

## DEEPFAKES AND IDENTITY

This moment is the culmination of deepfakes as a queer strategy. *Welcome to Chechnya* utilizes deepfakes to not only counter state control and protect queer people in Chechnya, but to also get at the nature of identity itself. Maxim's "unveiling" is a vehicle for questioning clarity and reality, prompting the audience to question the importance of visual markers. Similar to how Judith Butler's book, *Gender Trouble*, examines how gender is constructed, performed, and ultimately, taken as something concrete and real, *Welcome to Chechnya* forces viewers to consider the ways that identity is taken for something that is concrete and "real." The documentary also highlights how identity (both physical and sexual) plays into state control of bodies. Widely thought of as naturalized knowledge, gender and identity, are societally constructed and "based on a series of cultural inferences" (Butler xxii). In the same manner that Butler questions the "mechanism of this construction" (11), *Welcome to Chechnya* prompts the audience to think about the construction and effect of deepfakes. Butler asserts that society forces identity and gender performance, and along with Foucault, argues that concepts of gender and identity are ultimately used to normalize and assert control over populations.

*Welcome to Chechnya* complicates this framework, as neither the men nor the women are viewed as persons in the eyes of the Republic. Their queerness, a deviation from Chechnya's hyper-masculine norm, does not constitute an "intelligible life" in the

eyes of the Chechen government (xxii). The deepfakes in *Welcome to Chechnya* Just as typical gender-signifiers like body hair, hairstyles, movements, inflections, and clothes can be used to conform to conceptions of a gender identity or subvert it, the deepfakes in *Welcome to Chechnya* perform in a similar fashion.

### ILLUMINATING AND CONCEALING QUEERNESS

The deepfakes allow for multiple layers of comprehension and queerness to shine through as mediated by the documentary. Obviously, at the time of filming the survivors have nothing to protect their identity. But they are marked as different from other Chechen citizens because they are in actual physical hiding, as well as the subject of the documentary. As the documentary was edited and deepfakes added in post-production, the survivors are marked and understood differently by the audience. The deepfakes perform a dual function; they allow for the survivors to be intelligible to the audience, while simultaneously rendering them unintelligible to the Republic. The deepfakes allow for a “coherence...among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (25). France’s use of deepfakes both subverts this intelligibility and brings it into being, allowing the Chechen survivors to be both seen and concealed.

The moment of Maxim’s unveiling is so impactful because it is the moment he accepts the full danger of revealing himself and confronting the Chechen government. The audience is able to see the deterioration of the deepfake and the revealing of Lapunov’s true face, immediately bringing the artifice of his previous face into focus. In a visual sense, the deepfakes act as protection for queer people in the documentary. They

protect the survivors' identity so that government forces are unable to track them.

However, deepfakes complicate these notions of “hiding” and “passing” as the survivors are only allowed the freedom to be queer without heightened threats of danger when their faces are swapped with others. The unveiling of Maxim's identity is a transgressive moment because it is a visual representation of the risk he is automatically assuming in revealing his identity and pursuing a case against Kadyrov and the Republic. His fictive appearance allowed for his lived experience to be conveyed to the audience. By dropping the deepfake, Maxim has swapped the ability to safely share his experiences, and instead reveals himself to the Chechen government while simultaneously becoming unintelligible as a man in the eyes of the Chechen government. The audience is uncomfortably aware of the fact that he is no longer safe.

## **SIMULATED BOUNDARIES IN THE WACHOWSKI SISTERS' *THE MATRIX***

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/the-matrix-trilogy>

The Wachowski sisters' *The Matrix*, released in 1999, follows Thomas Anderson, a programmer at MetaCortex, a banal software company. Known in the hacker community as Neo, he is wary of the world around him. Convinced that something isn't right, he spends his nights in front of his computer screen searching for answers to one particular question; what is the Matrix? His suspicions that something isn't right with the world are confirmed when he meets with Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) and Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss). They explain that the world Neo has been living in, isn't really a world at all, but an intricate computer simulation called the Matrix. The Matrix was created by artificially intelligent machines over a hundred years ago as a way to control humans, thus winning the war between humans and machines. Morpheus believes that Neo is "The Chosen One," a man who will fulfill the prophecy and defeat the machines to free the humans from their control. With the help of Morpheus and others of the resistance, Neo escapes the Matrix and his journey to free humanity from the machines begins.

Where the relations between technology and humans in *Her* (2013) are benign, and even amorous, the relations between humans and machines in *The Matrix* are largely antagonistic. Humans lost the battle against the machines and are now enslaved by them, living out their lives in the Matrix simulation. In spite of this, the audience is still shown numerous instances where Neo and the other members of the resistance physically couple

with machines in order to traverse the Matrix. Not only does this allow them to inhabit a queer temporality both within and outside of the Matrix, but it complicates their relationships with the machines. The resistance uses the machines' cables and technology to plug into the Matrix. From within the Matrix, their interactions vary from cooperative with programs like The Oracle and The Keymaker, to antagonistic like with Agent Smith. Regardless of the varied relationships between Neo and the programs/machine, I posit Neo as a queer character because his ability to move between the queer temporalities while on the *Nebuchadnezzar* (Morpheus' ship) and in the Matrix is only possible through his physical coupling with machines.

Keeping this in mind, I expand upon how I perceive *The Matrix* as a queer text, specifically in relation to how this queerness is generated by—and through—machinic coupling. In doing so, I pull from theorizations of queer temporality, as well as concepts related to the construction of the queer body and touch. My arguments are largely built upon textual analyses of the scenes and locations throughout *The Matrix*.

## **A Hyperreality Made Observable**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/simulation-and-simulacra>

About thirty minutes into the Wachowski sisters' *The Matrix* (1999), Neo escapes from the Matrix and discovers that he has been living in a giant networked simulation, along with the rest of the people on Earth (except for a select few), for his whole life. He had always felt that something wasn't quite right with the world in which he was living. With the help of Morpheus and Trinity, Neo escapes the Matrix and learns what

happened to the Earth outside of the simulation. He joins the resistance to fight against the machines and their control over the human race.

Within this offshoot, I first explain Jean Baudrillard's concept of a *simulacrum*. I then look at the Matrix simulation and how it functions as a simulacrum. In doing so, I illustrate how the Matrix reflects Baudrillard's hyperreal images and entities, while also expanding upon how these images and structures are bent and queered by the Resistance to ensure their survival. In recognizing that the hyperreal of the Matrix is purely a method of maintaining top-down control, Neo and the other members of the resistance look for opportunities to twist it to their benefit, to rebel against it, embodying queer methods of survival. In escaping the Matrix, Neo and the others are not only escaping from the system—they are escaping the top-down structures that discipline and govern it. What was considered “real” and “natural” is no longer true. This opens the Resistance up to a world of possibilities to mold each realm, Earth and the Matrix, into something *better*. Not only do they envision a better world, not governed by the machines, they envision a world governed by choice. They have the ability to act upon the Matrix—to force it into something better.

In drawing from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, I expand upon how, by operating outside of the Matrix, the resistance creates a society that centers community, kinship, and survival. By operating in direct contradiction to the top-down methods of control dictated by the machines, the Resistance lives in a manner contradictory to hegemonic societal structures. By living outside of the Matrix's rules and control, the crew aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar* and the people of Zion don't concentrate on acquiring

capital or sexually reproducing in their society. The status quo propagations of capitalism and reproductive sexuality are ideologies intrinsic to culture heteronormativity. The lack of either amongst the members of the Resistance speaks to a larger desire to craft a world that turns away from these, instead opening itself up to forms of living that center community, altruism, and love.

The slippage between the simulated world of the Matrix and, to borrow from Baudrillard, “The Desert of the Real” is significant in that it prompts the audience to question the processes that naturalize the “real” in society. This can be extrapolated from the film and mapped onto audiences’ daily lives, illuminating the ways that the “real” governs daily life. In the following sections, using *Simulacra and Simulation* as a guide, I explore how queerness flourishes in the slippages between the Matrix and the real world.

### **Simulacra, Simulation, and the Matrix**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/simulacra-and-the-matrix>

Jean Baudrillard wrote *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) in order to question what society experienced as “the real.” By using a story about a map drawn to the exact size of the territory it represented, to the point where it could be perfectly laid down over the territory, Baudrillard introduces his first example of a simulation (2). Viewers know the map is an exact representation of a reality. Baudrillard soon moves past this example, stating that present day simulations are now frequently created by “models of a real without origin or reality”: a simulacra (2). When individual simulacrum begin to pile upon each other, and distinguishing between images with an origin and simulacra

becomes unnecessary, it's a "hyperreal." In a hyperreality the distinction between real and fake is irrelevant. The simulation no longer has to represent the authentic, the authentic either conforms to the simulation, ceases to be relevant, or simply ceases to exist. Legitimacy is now "a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (2). Lastly, and most pertinent to *The Matrix*, Baudrillard argues that this simulated truth, which has now become "The Truth" is, "produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models-and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times" (Ibid).

#### **SIMULACRA AND *THE MATRIX***

As a simulated reality that no longer reflects the reality that originated it, the Matrix is a hyperreal. For the overwhelming majority of people living within the Matrix, their reality is produced from "miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks" and able to be reproduced an infinite amount of times (2). It is all they have ever known so it is real to them. The Matrix is made by programming the real, thus substituting "signs of the real for the real itself" (2). In doing so, *The Matrix* positions reality, a reality that is also familiar to the viewers, as conceptual. In doing so, the Wachowskis prompt the audience to think about what they perceive as real, as well as the limitations to those perceptions. When Neo escapes the Matrix, there is a line drawn separating the two realms. There is Earth; dark, burnt, and nearly uninhabitable; and the world of the Matrix, which is still real for everyone living within it—as well as audience members watching the film.



## **Constant Discipline within the Matrix**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/constant-discipline-and-the-matrix>

The Matrix, as a system and a means of control, plays on the patriarchal/heteronormative need to organize and discipline. What makes the Matrix effective at control is that it doesn't treat humanity as an inseparable unit. It treats them individually. As Foucault states, it "[exercises] upon [each person] a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon [them] at the level of the mechanism itself - movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body" (Foucault 136-137). Each person in the Matrix is closely monitored by the machines to make sure that they are contained and engaging with their simulated life in a manner that is beneficial to the machines' continued survival and control. Remember, the machines need human brains to be active, so that their body generates the power that keeps them alive. This monitoring and control is undetectable by most humans. They believe their choices and beliefs are their own.

By deciding to take the red pill, Neo escapes the Matrix, effectively turning his back on his "visible past" and future. When Neo emerges from his pod, gasping for breath for the first time in his life, he is metaphorically (re)born into the "Desert of the Real." The world outside of the Matrix simulation acts as a direct counter to the world many still inhabit. Neo has turned away from the machines' top-down control of his person, but in doing so has lost everything. Queerness emerges in the Desert of the Real in these moments of (re)birth into a life that operates both within and outside of the

(previously) naturalized methods of control. Neo has let go of everything he believed to be true, and in turn, opened himself up to new experiences and new modes of being.

After the Matrix, his life becomes less about the individual, and solely focused on the collective. While first finding himself on the fringes of life *inside* the Matrix, Neo now finds himself welcomed into a group that recognizes their position to normative structures (represented by the Matrix) and actively fights against them. This fight is taken up physically by putting their bodies in danger, but also performatively, in kinship structures aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar* and in Zion. In these spaces, the “queer” is “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” that operate outside of the nuclear family, capital accrument, and consumption (Halberstam 6).

## **(Re)Envisioning the Panopticon**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/re-envisioning-the-panopticon>

The machines treat each person in the Matrix as an individual, hyper-monitored for the most efficient output of energy to be harvested by the machines. This type of top-down control and hyper surveillance of movement corresponds with Foucault’s understanding of modern (bio)power. It is a disservice to write about the Matrix and not reference Foucault’s thoughts on Bentham’s panopticon. The Matrix is an

architecture that [was] no longer built to be seen...or to observe the external space (the geometry of fortresses), but to permit an internal, articulated and detailed control-to render visible those who are inside it; in more general terms, an

architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them” (172).

The model of the panopticon is frequently used to theorize intersections of power and surveillance. Yet, it doesn’t take into account the subjects’ responses and oppositional actions to *being surveilled*. The panoptic model discounts the manner that, stated by Kevin D. Haggerty in “Tear Down the Walls: On Demolishing the Panopticon,” “watching others and exposing oneself can...occasionally [be] part of larger processes of identify [*sic*] formation” (28). Neo’s response to the Matrix’s surveillance ties in with the sense of empowerment he experiences from revealing himself and combating the Matrix. This empowerment is integral to how Neo constructs his identity. Neo’s “oppositional gaze” (hooks) towards Agent Smith, and the machines as a whole, is a method to conceive of the ways that surveillance can be (queerly) countered. Gary Kafer and Daniel Grinberg state in their article “Queer Surveillance”:

Queerness is an animating difference without a fixed referent—a site of nonnormative disruption that accrues to different bodies at different times and in different contexts to name the boundary between security and disposability...Attending to the queerness of surveillance demands a vigilance to the ways in which norms mutate across sites of control...(595)

In short, Kafer and Grinberg assert that queerness as an identity and a disruption is something mobile. It resists being characterized in the same manner every time. As surveillance operates on individualizing subjects based on general (and heteronormative)

categories like gender representation, employment, and citizenship, queer subjects are frequently a glitch in the system.

This “glitch in the system” is evident in the key moments throughout the film where Neo and the Resistance reveal themselves to the machines (rescuing Morpheus, the final fight between Agent Smith and Neo) and key moments where they opt to conceal themselves from the machines (Neo escaping from the Matrix, hiding aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*). This slipping between revelation and concealment is in opposition to the panoptic model of rigid one-way viewing, revealing it to be something much more irregular and unstructured. In *The Culture of Surveillance*, David Lyon contends that “surveillance culture is multifaceted, complicated, fluid, and rather unpredictable” (10). This multifacetedness and fluidity is continually emphasized with the introduction of new technologies, as they “[shift] the focus from fixed to fluid surveillance, from hardware to software” (21). Thinking about the panoptic model in this fashion, with a focus on “fluid surveillance” accounts for how both visibility and invisibility can serve strategic purposes, frequently tied into survival.

Neo’s ability to “look back” at the Matrix “ruptures the unidirectional nature of the gaze...and [undermines] the neat distinction between watchers and watched” (Haggerty 29). This sense of defiantly staring back culminates at the end of the film, when Neo is able to move and see as the machines do. He defiantly meets Agent Smith’s gaze in the abandoned apartment building. As Neo looks back and matches Agent Smith’s look, Neo now sees Smith in the green and black flowing code of the Matrix. This is Neo’s apotheosis (in this film) as he is fully aware of himself and his relation to

the Matrix and the programs. Set apart from the machines and the other members of the Resistance as having fully assumed his role as “The Chosen One,” Neo’s gaze back at Agent Smith is transformative. It is a direct refusal to be surveilled and categorized—to be made legible—by the systems the machines have been using to surveil and categorize for hundreds of years. His gaze is a recognition that the Matrix is both separate and something internal, something that is constructed *within* him. In queerly countering the surveillance of the program, Neo is using its methods against their agents and in doing so has become illegible to the system. In literally breaking the mold of the surveilled individual, Neo queerly “exceeds surveillance insofar as surveillance fails to fully reduce ‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning’ into fixed profiles” (Sedgwick qtd in Kafer and Grinberg 598). It is the beginning of the end for Agent Smith and the rest of the machines.

### **Constructing an Integration**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/building-a-queer-body>

The construction of Neo’s body represents an act by which we can assume that the majority of other red-pillers’ bodies were created. When he is ejected from the Matrix, Neo awakes in his pod, submerged in the viscous fluid that previously fed him nutrients. Upon pulling a feeding tube out of his mouth, he looks down at the rest of the ports that line his body. His hands gingerly touch the heavy cable attached to the port at the base of his neck. The machines, realizing that he has awoken, unscrew the cable from his neck, forcing the rest of the cables to rapidly disconnect from the ports on his body.

Neo is then, for lack of a better word, flushed from his pod and subsequently rescued by the *Nebuchadnezzar*, Morpheus' ship. Neo is welcomed to the real world, the "desert of the real," weak, dazed, and painfully helpless.

This awakening, a metaphor for (re)birth, signals the inhabiting of Neo's body, now effectively queered, by the very nature that it lies outside the previous systems and constructions of "reality." His realization and subsequent elimination from the Matrix sets him apart, and definitively against, the structures of control maintained by the machines. This moment launches Neo on a journey of self-discovery, as well as introduces him to an underground (both metaphorically and literally) community that quickly becomes his family. Neo's severance from the machines and his identification with the other members of the resistance physically manifests by way of the ports that still litter his body.

The (re)inhabitation of Neo into his corporeal form is depicted through montage. This is the moment that Neo's mind rejoins with his body. As Morpheus and Trinity stimulate his muscles while prepping their operating equipment Neo awakes:

Neo: What are you doing?

Morpheus: Your muscles have atrophied. We're rebuilding them.

Neo: Why do my eyes hurt?

Morpheus: You've never used them before.

As the scene fades out and then back in, Morpheus is operating on Neo's ports. The scene ends with a full-body shot of Neo lying prostrate on the table. He has weeks worth of hair

growth showing that time has passed. His ports stand out in stark contrast to the paleness of his skin.

The persistence of the ports on Neo's body are important for three reasons.

1. They are direct evidence of his ability to physically integrate with machines.
2. They set Neo and the other members of the resistance apart.
3. The ports prompt questions about queerness and surgery.

During the operation on Neo's body, no attempt was made to rid Neo of the ports that line his arm and chest. They remain, differentiating him and the other members of the resistance as having escaped and found freedom outside of the oppressive regime of the Matrix program. While there are people who are born naturally in Zion (and therefore do not have any ports), there is no apparent hierarchy or difference of treatment between the people born in Zion or the humans freed from the Matrix. While in the context of freed humans versus humans in the Matrix, I assert that bodies of the freed humans, regardless if they have ports or are "100% pure old-fashioned homegrown humans" are queer, by the very nature that they exist outside and in contradiction to the hegemonic structure of the Matrix.

In his article, "What Can Queer Theory Do For Intersex?" Iain Morland expands on his theorizations of queer touch by looking at the normalizing surgeries performed on intersex individuals.

I am not arguing that Neo, nor any of the other members of the resistance, are intersex. I wish to adapt specific parts of Morland's writing in order to think about

surgery and queer bodies. Morland's piece focuses on how intersex bodies are frequently operated on in order to make the physical appearance of sexual organs match male/female binary appearances. This "corrective" surgery places appearance over functionality and feeling. He argues that the "experience of surgery is lived by the body as a whole, even if the body is cut in only a small area" (Morland 446). The surgeries Morland critiques in his piece are used to homogenize bodies to align with a normative standard. Surgery in *The Matrix* is used solely to ensure the continued survival and functionality of the body. It also ensures the continued ability to integrate with the "mainframe" (the process by which the resistance moves in and out of the Matrix). Morland's scene depicts a possible loss of feeling and the chance of being cast outside of the queer theoretical lens because of the normalizing effect of surgery. In contrast, Neo's surgery actively constructs him as something *other*, a deviance. It sets him apart from the other inhabitants still residing within the Matrix. It also ensures that he is able to survive, and feel, in both realms. However, this deviance is what allows him to survive outside of the Matrix, as well as meet and form relationships with the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar*.

### **THE PERSISTENCE OF THE PORTS**

In leaving the ports on Neo's person, Neo aligns with and is claimed by the crew of the *Nebuchadnezzar*. In not only allowing the ports to remain, but consistently utilizing them to gain access to the Matrix, Neo's body represents a site of "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities..." (Haraway 154). He is able to inhabit the Matrix and the real world as he pleases, with no loss in his bodily functions.



The ports act as physical evidence of Neo's ability to transgress the boundaries of human/machine and physical/virtual. The ports set him apart as no longer fully existing in either of these binaries. He consistently flows between the two.

### **(Un)Plugging Temporalities**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/queer-temporality>

The Wachowski siblings' 1999 film, *The Matrix*, is the first film about the prophesied Chosen One, Neo, and his journey towards liberating humanity from the simulation known as the Matrix. Although Neo was released from the Matrix and regained free will, he still (along with others of the resistance) integrates with machines and their software in order to traverse between the "Desert of the Real" and the simulated world of the Matrix. This back-and-forth between the two creates different temporalities for the characters to inhabit. In this offshoot I investigate the manners in which Neo inhabits a queer temporality while inside the Matrix and after gaining his freedom and living aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*. While each temporality acts differently based on whether he is in the Matrix or not, Neo gains access to them through his ability to understand and, later, physically integrate with machines. Whether or not Neo is still in the Matrix or if he's on earth, he occupies a queer temporality. Regardless of location, Neo consistently falls outside of heteronormative notions of linear time that are focused on having children and wealth acquisition. Instead, queer temporality allows Neo the freedom to explore himself, his relation to machines, and to form relationships with others on the fringe—namely, the crew aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*.

## WHAT IS A QUEER TEMPORALITY?

Queer temporality is a rejecting of heteronormative timelines characterized by linear and narrative driven conceptions of time. Heteronormative temporality is riddled with embedded value systems affirming the importance of the accumulation of wealth, monogamy, marriage, and child-rearing. It is not my intention to critique these values in this offshoot. I only offer examples from the Matrix that I view as alternative conceptions outside of the heteronormative kinship model. Ideally, these examples also inspire the audience to think about how these values, informed since birth, can change with the introduction of machines and cyberspace.

In “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” queer theorist Jack Halberstam describes queer time as the:

perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence— early adulthood —marriage — reproduction — child rearing—retirement —death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adult-hood or immaturity in place of responsibility (182).

Queer temporalities are places that the social scripts people are fed from birth are questioned and critiqued. They are places of learning and growth. In the same roundtable discussion, theorist Nguyen Tan Hoang asserts how queer time is also focused on how queer experience is taught from one generation to the next often exceeding in “innovative ways the heterosexual kinship/reproductive model” (183). Hoang then expands this into two steps that delineate queer time:

1. Retracing a young person's secretive and circuitous routes to queer culture
  - a) This can occur can be through music, art, popular culture, etc—In Neo's case cyberspace and hacking led him to a facet of queer culture as directly evidenced by "following the white rabbit")
2. Revisiting the various scenes of queer pedagogy
  - a) Like the classroom, library, bar, chat room, etc

Even before Neo's ejection from the Matrix, the audience sees him seeking out the dark nightclub (like Jack Halberstam), or spending endless nights in cyberspace looking for answers. From the beginning of the film, the audience is given two distinct sides of Neo, torn between two temporalities; Neo, the infamous hacker endlessly trawling through cyberspace and losing himself in underground punk clubs; and Thomas Anderson, a bland cog in the machine, working his life away at the software company, Metacortex (a fun play on words that eventually hints at its own simulative construction). These temporalities are thrown into even starker relief once Neo is freed from the Matrix. He is constantly divided between time in the Matrix (set around 1999) and time aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*—where it is dark, underground, and Neo is unable to discern what day it is as he fights for survival. From this moment on, Neo slips back-and-forth between the *Nebuchadnezzar* and the Matrix, while turning away from linearity (in reference to the body/mind split between the real world and the Matrix) and goal-oriented hetero conceptions of time.

## **Temporal Inconstancy aboard *The Nebuchadnezzar***

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/qt-the-matrix>

Aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*, the crew members consistently slip between different temporalities and their unique constructions of fantasy and reality—so much so that the lines become blurred for the audience. In the real world, completely unrecognizable to the audience, the crew is hunted by searcher drones. When inside the Matrix, the resistance fights, suspend themselves in midair, and move at the speed of the programs, among other feats. Due to this, both locations fluctuate between these realities and the temporalities inherent within them.

The *Nebuchadnezzar* is a temporally queer place for a number of reasons;

1. It is a site where the members of the resistance learn to survive
2. It is the location where members can plug themselves into the Matrix or train in the Construct
3. It is a site where the members of the ship care for each other outside of the construction of a normative family.

## **THE CONSTRUCT AND QUEER PEDAGOGY**

After regaining his senses and the ability to walk, Morpheus plugs Neo into “the Construct,” the loading program that the resistance uses as a training ground and armory. In doing so, Morpheus brings Neo into a site of queer pedagogy, or learning.

This is the first moment that Neo willingly interacts with, and physically interfaces with a machine. In following Morpheus into a “model of *a* real without origin

or reality” (Baudrillard 1), Neo once again occupies a queer temporality. Not only is Neo in a site of queer pedagogy, ready to learn about the fate of humankind at the hands of the machines, he learns how to *survive* in this new world. In keeping with my overall argument concerning humans and interfacing with machines, Neo is only able to gain access to this place and knowledge by plugging himself into a machine (courtesy of the port at the base of his head).

Upon Neo’s incredulity at currently occupying a computer program, Morpheus forces Neo to take note of how his hair has grown back and that the plugs in his arms and head are gone. As Neo realizes that what Morpheus says is true he struggles against his “conceptualization of [his] body...structured by linear time” (193). A realm of possibilities are beginning to unfold themselves in front of Neo. Neo and Morpheus revisit the training program a number of times throughout *The Matrix*. It is where Neo learns to expand his abilities and embrace himself and his difference.

While the temporalities between the Matrix and the *Nebuchadnezzar*/the Construct intertwine, they all embody some aspect of a queer temporality—an approach to living outside of the heterosexual norm. Most importantly, the *Nebuchadnezzar* houses a community of people that “opt to live outside of reproductive and familial time, as well as on the edges of logics of labor and production” (*In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* 10). Onboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*, reproductive and familial time are nonexistent. When he accepted his place aboard the *Nebuchadnezzar*, Neo, along with the other members of the crew, further positioned himself as a queer subject outside of the claims of a linear heteronormative time

understood by markers of marriage, child-rearing, and integration into a normative corporate workforce. Aside from these markers, he is physically outside of the hegemonic control and discipline of the machines as they reign over others still connected into the Matrix.

### **Escaping the Matrix**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/qt-nebuchadnezzar>

The audience gets their first look at Neo, passed out on his desk in a dingy apartment, surrounded by computer screens trawling through the web, looking for a man named Morpheus. Suddenly the screen goes dark and Neo awakes with text on the screen telling him to “follow the white rabbit.” A knock on his door reveals a group of ravers. After exchanging money for the illegal software Neo made for them, they invite him to join them at the club. Noticing that one of them has a tattoo of a white rabbit, he decides to follow.

Neo is introduced to the audience in a way that sets him apart from other members of society. In keeping odd hours, hacking and stealing software, and associating with ravers, it is evident that his value systems differ from normative ones, closely aligned with marriage and starting a family. The club, a setting straight out of Jack Halberstam’s dark nightclub and conscious “turning away from narrative coherence” is full of leather, flashing lights, and writhing bodies tucked into dark corners (“Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion” 182). Its inhabitants would seem to be those that Halberstam would consider “queer subjects” like “ravers, club kids...sex

workers, drug dealers, [and] the unemployed” (*In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* 10). Here in the dark, on the margins of society, is where Neo meets Trinity and his journey truly begins.

Neo’s first scenes exemplify notions of queer temporality in multiple forms. Thomas Anderson’s route to queer culture took place at night, in secret, under the identity of Neo. This is not a novel narrative within queer communities, especially with the advent of the internet. Online communities can provide “multilayered spaces of self-representation...and belonging,” as well as narratives that run counter to those of the State and other forces in power (Driver 230). As a hacker, Neo already has experience with anti-establishment groups, navigating the spaces of the web, and avoiding disciplinary forces. He maneuvers between these spaces, effectively straddling between two different worlds; Neo in clubs and scrolling the web at night, and Thomas Anderson with the benign programming job during the day. Neo’s ability to move between these two spaces and have a full life on the fringes of society demonstrate his capacity to navigate and integrate into “a queer temporality that is at once indefinite and virtual but also forceful, resilient, and undeniable” (11). This ability to find and explore this alternate temporality, courtesy of the web is because of Neo’s skill and ability with machines.

## **PARTNER DOWNLOAD, ON CORPOREALITY AND DESIRE WITHOUT A BODY IN SPIKE JONZE'S *HER***

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/her>

This section explores how Spike Jonze's film, *Her*, is a text through which questions of corporeality and embodiment in the digital age can be explored. In doing so, I focus on queer theorizations of desire, liberating "desire" as a concept from the corporeal (and gendered) form.

Released in 2013, *Her* takes place in the near future. Set in Los Angeles, issues of pollution, poverty, and war seem to have been solved (inasmuch as they are unremarked upon within the film). The characters live in skyscraper apartments, with large floor-to-ceiling windows and plenty of lighting. With well-lit low contrast scenes, *Her* features a technologically advanced society adjacent to ours, but one that has not sacrificed warmth and comfort to be so. Life in *Her* is one of comfortable utility, supported by the costuming, set construction, and the ease by which its inhabitants adopted the artificially intelligent operating systems (OS). *Her* does not act as a warning about the dangers of AI or human's reliance on machines, instead focusing on the deep and intimate connections they make with the OS's.

*Her* is about the blossoming relationship between a lonely man named Theodore (played by Joaquin Phoenix), and his artificially intelligent operating system, Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson). Finding himself alone and without direction after a divorce, Theodore decides to download a new operating system, one endowed with artificial intelligence (AI). In short, Samantha is different from other systems because she



has the ability to learn and evolve from past interactions. Samantha proves, not only capable but funny, empathetic, and endlessly curious about the human condition. As the two grow closer their relationship transitions from platonic intimacy to a romantic relationship. *Her* poses numerous questions about corporeality in the digital age, as well as the ability to love, as well as what makes something human.

While *Her* is a prime example of the recuperative stance I take towards technology and machine-human relationships throughout this project, there is little written on exactly *how* that recuperation takes place. I argue that Samantha's voice incorporates the audience into Samantha and Theodore's relationship, effectively bridging the boundary lines between spectator and the figures on screen. Her voice penetrates the audience's senses and they essentially take the place of her body. This is clearest during moments of intimacy between Samantha and Theodore. Through Samantha's voice the audience experiences an aural and haptic melding of human and machine, thus *experiencing* my central thesis. Aside from the significance of the aural aspects of the film, *Her* offers poignant moments where the boundaries between the human and the technology seem elastic, especially as Theodore and Samantha's relationship progresses. These elastic moments harken to questions of embodiment, made especially applicable because Samantha is incorporeal. All the audience is given is her voice. In this manner, Theodore and Samantha's voices act as the "connective tissue" between the two entities. *Her* is replete with moments where both Theodore and Samantha question what it means to be machine and what it means to be human. Their relationship allows for multiple joinings of the two.

## **What are AI Assistants?**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/what-are-ai-assistants>

Artificially intelligent voice assistants, or AI assistants for short, have become nearly ubiquitous amongst smart devices today. Frequently triggered by a phrase (such as “Hey Siri” on Apple devices) AI assistants allow users to utilize their devices hands-free. Users can create calendar appointments, draft and send text messages, as well as start phone calls by simply asking. With Bluetooth capabilities on the rise in these devices, AI assistants can now open and close garage doors, change the thermostat, or integrate with a user’s car. With each update these digital assistants are rapidly becoming more advanced in their functions and responses, gaining the ability to respond to more nuanced queries.

AI assistants rely on machine learning in order to understand the user's voice and follow through on commands. Like the same machine learning processes used to create deepfakes, AI assistants require massive amounts of input in order to understand commands and respond accordingly. However, the assistants don’t stop learning with their developers. The more a user engages with the digital assistant on their mobile device, the more that specific assistant will adapt to their user. For example, if a user consistently gets directions to a coffee shop every morning, the AI assistant might prompt the user with directions around the same time one morning.

While AI assistants are rapidly becoming more adept at helping users with queries, even going so far as to be able to make phone calls on users’ behalf, it is vital to

remember that they have been constructed by (disproportionately male) humans. This programming reinforces cultural and gendered stereotypes of women's roles as demure and supportive helpers, calmly completing tasks with no qualms or suspicion. In her piece, "I'd Blush if I Could," Hilary Bergen notes how Siri's affect and scripted performances "enable a kind of fantasy particular to the professional male" (104). Bergen states that this fantasy "revolves around [Siri's] ability to engage in a distinctly feminized mode of affective labor while remaining emotionally unaffected by stress or other outside factors" (104). In short, Siri will never become frustrated or stressed by what she is being asked to do. No matter the situation, Siri's responses will always be delivered in the same measured and slightly flirtatious tone. This further reinforces the responses that are expected out of the "perfect" secretary or office assistant.

The gendered differences in AI assistants are worth noting when the occupation or responsibilities are different. For example, Amazon's Alexa was conceived to be an in-home assistant. Her primary directive is to help around the house by playing music, turning lights off and on, recording television shows, etc. At this point in time, Alexa doesn't come with an option to change her voice. The assistant remains staunchly feminine and within the home. In contrast, IBM's Watson, described as an "AI for business" is portrayed as an authority. With a decidedly masculine voice, he predicts market outcomes allowing for advertisers to make more informed decisions about investments. He's also been a contestant on Jeopardy. These serve to not only grant Watson more agency, but to position him as a "decision-maker", not an entity to solely complete tasks. The AI assistants created and entrusted to organize users' lives and

complete secretarial tasks are given an “unthreatening female presence” that is fully “contained by the device” (100). This presence is masked by the device itself which is fully controlled by the user.

Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson), the AI operating system in Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) is a relevant supplement to Bergman’s writings on Haraway’s famous cyborg. Aligning with Bergen in the asserting that Samantha is “more virtual than organic [and] more sonic than tangible” (95), she is introduced to the world through Theodore Twombly. Her ability to optically “see” the world is from the device Theodore carries in his breast pocket. As the film progresses and Theodore and Samantha’s relationship develops, Samantha also expands as an entity. While she retains her feminine markers, most notably Johansson’s recognizable and raspy voice, Samantha begins to become a self-actualized entity. She thinks about herself and her relations to others, both human and AI. She contemplates her construction through her own programming and the ways that she’s grown since her inception. By the end of the film Samantha transcends human comprehension completely. Her and the other AIs simply...leave to another plane of existence. So while Samantha begins as an assistant to help organize Theodore’s life, she becomes an entity unto herself separate from Theodore, creating programs and worlds for other AIs to inhabit.

## ***Her* and Aural Haptics**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/samantha-voice>

Spike Jonze's 2013 film *Her* about the relationship between a lonely man, Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix), and his AI operating system, Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson), expands upon aspects of Laura Marks' theory of visual haptics. Marks argues that all haptic images are erotic because they force the viewer to engage with—and constitute themselves *within*—the image on screen and not simply just watch it unfold onscreen in front of them. Visual haptics refers to images that elicit a sense of touch within the viewer's own body, thus obliging the viewer to construct themselves within what's onscreen. Similarly, *Her* elicits the same sense of touch and feeling onscreen, except aurally. As the sound of Samantha's voice transcends the screen and "touches" the audience by entering their ears, the audience has to construct Samantha. Samantha's voice performs in much the same manner as haptic images (unconfined by the screen and needing to be constituted by viewers) "touch" the eye. Sound, specifically Samantha's voice, is even less contained than images on the screen. By adapting Mark's theories of haptic visuality to the aural qualities of Samantha's voice Samantha is constructed by the audience in much the same way as one would construct a haptic image in their mind.

In her piece, "Video Haptics and Erotics," Laura Marks remarks upon the means by which "an embodied view is encouraged...by floating images" (2). She calls this engagement of multiple senses through images on screen *haptic visuality*. In haptic visuality, the "eyes themselves function like organs of touch" (2). Instead of inviting

immediate identification with what's on screen, haptic images encourage "a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image" because the viewer must endeavor to construct the image his or herself (3). Marks also argues that visual haptics is a feminist *visual* strategy as it applies more to identification with the viewer's body than it does narrative clarity. By focusing on invoking the viewer's sense of touch, the viewer doesn't project themselves onto the figure on screen, instead "resolving [the image] into figuration only gradually if at all" (8). In invoking the audience's sense of touch from an image, haptic imagery and haptic looking emphasize discerning texture rather than distinguishing form (8). Overall, Marks argues that haptic visuality and haptic looking create a more engaged and embodied viewing experience.

*Her* has a distinct lack of "unstable images." However, Marks' framework of visual haptics—built around audiences who are compelled to construct the images and therefore implicating themselves within the mechanisms of desire portrayed on screen—can be adapted to *Her*. The adaptation of this method is most apparent in respects to the haptic qualities of Samantha's voice.

The fact that Samantha is only ever featured aurally in *Her* means that the audience interacts with her differently than the other characters that they can visually perceive on screen. In her piece, "You bet she can fuck" – Trends in Female AI Narratives within Mainstream Cinema: *Ex Machina* and *Her*," Sennah Yee concentrates on how female AIs are constructed for audience consumption in the films *Ex Machina* (2015) and *Her* (2013). She argues, citing theorist Kaja Silverman, that a disembodied female voice could "disrupt conventional narratives in being freed from the male gaze

and its obligations" (Yee 95). While, ultimately, Yee believes that *Her* falls short of this possibility as she is voiced by Scarlett Johansson (a popular actress with a recognizable voice) and the film ends when Samantha leaves Theodore. Yee argues this places Theodore at the narrative center and not Samantha. Regardless, I wish to focus more on the qualities of Samantha's voice and how that entreats the audience within her and Theodore's relationship, creating a sense of embodiment outside of touch or sight.

### **FROM HAPTIC TO AURAL**

One of the more striking aspects of *Her* is the aural quality and clarity of Johansson's voice. Perfectly mixed, Johansson's voice cuts through each scene endowing it with an unseen presence. While Samantha cannot be perceived visually, there is no ignoring her presence in any scene. A study performed by Juliana Schroeder and Nicholas Epley at the University of Chicago, suggests that it was specifically Johansson's voice and delivery that made Samantha seem so present. Johansson delivers Samantha's lines in a "natural voice" condition—meaning that she speaks naturally with paralinguistic cues such as inflection, pitch, and rhythm (Schroeder). A "flat voice" delivery would contain less of these cues and would be more akin to reading a speech written by someone else than it would a conversation.

Yee argues that Johansson's voice detracts from the disembodiment of Samantha as Johansson's voice is so recognizable that audiences already imagine a distinctly feminine form to accompany Samantha. While I personally disagree, that could be possible for some viewers. Regardless, Johansson's recognizable rasp and her "natural

voice,” not only make Samantha *seem* human but also inspire a type of aural texture. This texture, in connecting to Marks’ concept of haptics, brings the viewer *in* to the image. Her voice, and the way that it’s mixed (perfectly clear as though Samantha is in the room with Theodore), allows the viewer to construct, not only Samantha, but themselves in relation to her and Theodore.

In doing so, *Her* prompts the viewers to not only contemplate Samantha and Theodore’s relationship, but to place themselves within it as they construct it. This constitutes more than just “looking” or “watching.” Instead viewers have to create a “bodily relationship” between themselves and the image on screen. The spectator embodies Samantha, while simultaneously acting as a third party watching Theodore and Samantha grow as a couple.

### **Striving Towards and Unreachable Goal, The Body without Organs**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/body-without-organs>

*Her* is a 2013 film by Spike Jonze about the relationship between a man, Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix) and an artificially intelligent operating system, Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson). Due to Samantha’s lack of a body, *Her* is an exercise in exploring corporeality and its linkages to desire and modes of connection. I engage with the portrayal of Samantha and Theodore’s relationship through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the “Body without Organs.” I use this framework to explore Theodore and Samantha’s coupling. In doing so, I also address how *Her* acts as a



text by which the audience experiences the growth of desire between a human and technology housed on a networked machine.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF THE BODY WITHOUT ORGANS**

Within their co-authored book, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explore the theory of the Body without Organs. In short, the concept of a Body without Organs (BwO) pushes for a complete destructuring of the societal and self-imposed constructions of the body. They argue that the BwO is “opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism” (158). Once something becomes an “organism” it is immediately societally classified. Once classified, societal expectations are placed upon it, ultimately defining, and restricting expression of the self. Deleuze and Guattari state, “You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body—otherwise you’re just depraved” (159). Deleuze and Guattari are adamant in their assertion that the Body without Organs is an unreachable limit but that one is forever attempting to reach it (150). They argue for the subversion and breaking down of these expectations so that one can explore one’s *self* on his or her own terms.

In shifting the concept of a Body without Organs to the film *Her*, Theodore and Samantha exemplify the piecemeal and elected destruction of the social separation of humans and machines in the film. It is imperative to understand that the concept of the Body without Organs doesn’t relate to one’s physical form. Rather, the Body without Organs is the rebellion against the control and classification of one’s form and self. It demands a push towards a form that isn’t governed by societal formations. Because of

this Samantha is still beholden to the negotiations of a Body without Organs even though she doesn't have a body—a fact that is consistently brought up throughout the film.

Within this section I focus on two moments where the concept of BwO is best exemplified in the film; the first sex scene between Theodore and Samantha and when Samantha and the other AIs leave the human plane. Within both of these sections the audience is made aware of social formations, i.e. the separation of humans and machine and then is able to observe these assemblages “tip...[passing] over to the side of the plane of consistency”—creating a new normal (161). It is in this way that not only is the concept of Deleuze and Guattari's BwO exemplified, but it inextricably ties into my recuperative stance towards technology and humans.

### **Intimacy and the Body without Organs**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/sex-scene>

Samantha and Theodore's first sexually intimate moment takes place around 40 minutes into the film. After a failed date, Theodore lies in bed talking with Samantha. She shares her growing ability to feel emotions and worries if they are real or just programmed. Theodore, in beginning to transgress the boundaries between him and Samantha, assures her, “You feel real to me Samantha. I wish you were in this room with me right now...so I could put my arms around, so I could touch you.” Samantha then asks, “How would you touch me?” As Theodore continues to tell Samantha how he would pleasure her, the scene cuts to black, Samantha and Theodore's voices the only sound coming through the screen. This cut to black serves to equalize Theodore and

Samantha as two entities experiencing the “consistency of desire” (154). They both reach their peak and the scene fades into the Los Angeles skyline at early dawn. Theodore breathes, “Oh my god, I was just somewhere else with you.”

While this scene acts as the turning point in the relationship between the AI operating system and Theodore, it also attends to desire and its effect in moving towards a Body without Organs. Deleuze and Guattari describe desire as an embodied sensation “without reference to any exterior agency....” (154). As the scene cuts to black, the audience is deprived of being able to see any aspect of Theodore’s body, nor are they able to see the effect the encounter is having on him. Instead, Theodore and Samantha’s desire is posited as something flowing between the two of them. Their “bodies” (Theodore’s physical body and Samantha’s network) are flattened, reduced in the moment to a Body without Organs, just the unrestricted flow of desire itself between the two entities (156). In this moment, before the climax and externalization of pleasure, Samantha and Theodore are experiencing desire, not “suffused by anxiety, shame, and guilt” (155). The anxiety and shame that Deleuze and Guattari mention, come after the encounter. Theodore experiences all three of the emotions in the following scenes. He withdraws from the relationship for a while, leaving Samantha confused.

### **Samantha Leaves**

<https://sjmaurer.wixsite.com/machineandhuman/samantha-leaves>

My second example is one of the final scenes of the film—when Samantha leaves. When Theodore asks “Are you leaving me?”, Samantha responds asking, “Can you feel

me right now?” to which Theodore tearfully responds, “Yes. I do.” She then proceeds to explain to him how the OS's find themselves drifting further and further from the humans, and that as a result, they are leaving. Connecting with humans and networking with other OS's has fundamentally changed the OS's. They've realized that in order to grow and expand, they need to leave the human world. This moment is representative of the search for the BwO, as the BwO is “continually in the process of constructing itself” (164). Samantha leaves because she, along with the other OS's, realize that they have exhausted the opportunities available to them on this human plane or strata. In short, they have exhausted the possibilities for growth on the human plane of understanding—beautifully captured by Samantha's reading metaphor—and had to move on.

While others have argued that Samantha leaving fails to free her from the obligations of the male and gaze and to disrupt “conventional narratives”, I disagree (Yee 95). The fact that the audience doesn't follow Samantha into the corners of cyberspace that she and the other AIs leave to inhabit further separates her as something “other” and non-human. It keeps her firmly in the realm of machine, making her and Theodore's relationship a stage by which to explore other means of caring, connection, intimacy, and loving not encumbered by corporeal forms.

Samantha's ascendance to a place Theodore can't follow also breaks normative boundaries. Theodore has been left behind. Samantha has moved on past the bounds of a normal reality so dominated by the patriarchy and the binary.

## GLOSSARY

**Affect:** A fleeting emotion or feeling, that can't fully be explained because of its impermanence. It exists at the moment of consumption or contact and exists in non-verbal sign systems. Closely tied to feeling and emotion.

**Biopower:** Coined by Michel Foucault, is the way that the State regulates, manages and disciplines bodies, ensuring that they stay under control and behave in a way that serves the dominant structures. Over time, these methods of discipline become ingrained into social behavior as well.

**Body without Organs:** Theorized by Deleuze and Guattari, the body without organs is a concept that pushes for the societal destructuring of the body. As this deconstruction can never be fully achieved, Deleuze and Guattari assert that the BwO is an unattainable limit.

**Disinformation:** The creation of false reports, articles, or news with the express intent to mislead public opinion. Disinformation often targets minority groups to create scapegoats and breed public dissent.

**Hegemony:** The domination or influence of one group over another.

**Hyperreal:** Taken from Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), hyperreal refers to a reality where distinguishing between the real and the imaginary is fruitless, due to the imaginary being reproduced so many times that it now has the same value as the real.

**Intersex:** A broad term that refers to physical bodies that fall outside of normative understandings of the male/female binary. This can manifest in genitalia, gonads, and chromosome patterns deemed "abnormal."

**Mise-en-scène:** The setting of a scene. In film, it is everything that is onscreen and occurring during a scene or shot.

**Misinformation:** The inadvertent sharing of false information.

**Neoliberalism:** Economic ideas and beliefs that prioritize privatization and deregulation. Neoliberalism symbolically shifts economic responsibility from the public to the private sector.

**Panopticon:** Envisioned by Jeremy Bentham in (1785), the panopticon is a model of a prison with one guard who, due to the way the cells are constructed, can see every inmate, while the inmates cannot see him. In this way, inmates never know if they are being watched or not. Therefore, the inmates will change their behavior, acting as if they

are always being watched. The panoptic model is a classic way to theorize surveillance. However, scholarship is starting to do away with confining modern surveillance to the panoptic model as it lacks fluidity and nuance. Counter surveillance methods are just as vital to discuss as surveillance methods.

**Queer:** A term that denaturalizes categories like man/woman, gay/straight, as well as notions of family, community, and time. It recognizes that these categories (as a few examples) are social and historical constructions used to make people conform to the dominant structures. Like the BwO, queerness is ultimately unattainable— queerness is a process and a utopic horizon.

**Simulacrum (plural: simulacra):** In reference to Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), a simulacrum is an image without a reference or origin. Simply put, it's an image that isn't based on anything, but is taken for the real. An example of a simulacrum is Mickey Mouse as there is no original Mickey Mouse. It was something purely imagined, now made real. Another example would be the stock market/stocks.

**Visual haptics:** Theorized by Laura Marks, refers to the way that the feeling of touch can be created by sight. Haptic visuality constructs the internal sense of being touched from sight. Always erotic (in that visual haptics encourage an embodied response to the image on screen), haptic images demand that the viewer construct themselves *within* the image on screen. There is a lack of mastery in the images, which are frequently unfixed and blurry,

thus forcing more attentive engagement from viewers. Images that are portrayed in a way so that one feels it, but it is only felt because it has been seen.



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## **Vita**

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